DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 187 RC 018 753

AUTHOR Nicholl, James R.
TITLE The First Mexican American Fictional Hero.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 13p.; A revision of an unpublished paper originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Literature Association (Ft. Worth, TX, October 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; American Indians; *Ethnic Bias; *Ethnic Stereotypes; *Fiction; Literary History; *Mexican Americans; *United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS Cowboys; *Heroes; Live Boys in the Black Hills; Live Boys or Charley and Nasho in Texas

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the appearance of the first Mexican-American fictional hero in American literature. In 1878 a book entitled, "Live Boys; or, Charley and Nasho in Texas" was published in Boston; the book described the adventures of a Mexican-American hero called Nasho from the Southwestern United States. The author was Thomas Pilgrim, a young Austin (Texas) lawyer originally from Gonzales, Texas. A sequel to the book was also published and entitled "Live Boys in the Black Hills or the Young Texan Gold Hunters." The first novel involved an authentic description of a cow trail drive from Texas to Kansas. The Chicano boy, Ygnacio de Garapitas (Nasho), was a native of the Texas side of the lower Rio Grande river valley. More knowledgeable than most adult Anglo-American men about Indians and outdoor lore, Nasho in both novels often demonstrates his wisdom, as well as his skill and bravery, in a variety of challenging situations. The first novel also features the hunting adventures of Nasho and his Anglo companion Charley and describes the boys' visit to the great 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and their return trip to central Texas via Kansas and the Indian Territory. The author used Nasho to break a 19th-century American literary tradition of portraying Mexicans and Mexican Americans as cowardly. This paper provides excerpts from both novels. Pilgrim never completed an anticipated third novel; readers are left to surmise what other adventures happened in the life of Nasho, most likely the first Mexican-American fictional hero. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The First Mexican American Fictional Hero

James R. Nicholl
Department of English
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, NC 28723

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
James R. Nicholl
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED348187

(A revision of an unpublished paper originally presented at the Western Literature Association's annual meeting in Ft. Worth, Texas, October 1985)

Conscientious teachers of American literature are now striving to give increasing attention to the cultural diversity which is part of our country's heritage. To do that, those teachers must first themselves learn about key aspects of cultures other than the dominant white European one, featured for generations in the American history and literature textbooks of schools and colleges. For some years now this effort has of course already been underway for African American history and literature, and the contributions of Native Americans have recently drawn considerable attention. However, Mexican American (also called Chicano and Hispanic-American) contributions are only slowly finding their way into school curricula and materials to any significant extent; consequently, teachers who intend to integrate that culture's history and literature into their classes generally need new and specialized knowledge. This paper describes what is almost certainly the first appearance of a Mexican American hero in American literature. (The fact that this hero is a teenager, as is his Anglo companion in these fictional adventures, will be of particular interest to teachers of Young Adult literature.)

The Mexican American roots of American literature reach back into the nineteenth century, but not so very far. For instance,

RC018753

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the serialization of Joaquin Murieta's Robin Hood-like adventures in an 1881 California newspaper is believed to mark the first publication of the feats of an actual Chicano hero in the United States (Tatum 23-24, 174). Three years earlier, however, the adventures of a fictional Mexican American hero from the American Southwest had already found their way into print. Furthermore, those adventures appeared, not in a Spanish-language newspaper, magazine, or book printed west of the Mississippi (as did virtually all tales of Mexican Americans in those days), but rather in an English-language novel for boys, published by Lee and Shepard of Boston. That book was Live Boys; or, Charley and Nasho in Texas (hereafter cited as LBT), written under the pseudonym Arthur Morecamp. The author was actually Thomas Pilgrim, a young Austin lawyer originally from Gonzales, Texas, who published two more novels before his death in 1882 (Wallace 315, 358; Kirk II, 1236; Bentley and Pilgrim 58). One of those books was a sequel to the 1878 Live Boys novel, called Live Boys in the Black Hills or The Young Texan Gold Hunters (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1880) (hereafter cited as LBBH).

J. Frank Dobie described Pilgrim's first novel as "The chronicle, little fictionized, of a trail drive to Kansas. So far as I know, this is the first narrative printed on cattle trailing or cowboy life that is to be accounted authentic" (113). However, Live Boys; or, Charley and Nasho in Texas is much more than just the original ancestor of Andy Adams' classic account of cowboy life and trail driving, The Log of a Cowboy (1903), and its many successors. While an 1876 trail drive from South Texas to the railroad at Ellis, Kansas, occupies the central third of this

novel, the opening third features hunting adventures of the two boys who are the main characters. The last third of the book describes the boys' visit to the great 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and their return trip to central Texas via Kansas and the Indian Territory, including two confrontations with renegade Indians. Anticipating the Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer who would appear in Mark Twain's great novel in 1885, the two fourteen-year-old orphans get into various scrapes, some in that Indian "Territory" that Huck thought he might "light out for."

The Chicano boy, Ygnacio de Garapitas (usually called "Nasho," with a long a), is a native of the Texas side of the lower Rio Grande River valley. More knowledgeable than most adult Anglo-American men about Indians and outdoor lore, Nasho in both novels often demonstrates his wisdom, as well as his skill and bravery, in a variety of challenging situations. His trials and learning had started at age six, when Kickapoo marauders massacred his Mexican parents and baby sister, sat fire to the family jacal, and rode off with the family's horses and Nasho (LBT 11-12). After seven years of captivity, Nasho was liberated by Texans in 1875 while on a horse-stealing trip with two adult Indians (14-18). As a result he becomes the ward of Adolphus Zanco, owner of a stock farm on Turtle Creek in the Central Texas hills southwest of Kerrville, then a frontier village with twenty-five inhabitants (Morgan 57).

Mr. Zanco is also the uncle of the other orphan, Charles Zanco. Like Tom Sawyer, Charley is an avid reader but no bookworm, possessing instead his own set of heroic attributes,

sometimes surpassing those of Nasho, especially in the second novel. Charley serves as the narrator of both works, with the sequel being mostly in epistolary style. Live Boys in the Black Hills also includes among its incidents another trail drive, this time in the first third of the book, with the rest of the story then shifting to fortune-hunting adventures in the Black Hills of Dakota Territory in 1877. Both novels also feature an adult male character who sometimes serves as the boys' mentor and protector; he is the trailboss Captain Dick, himself noteworthy as the first fictional cowboy hero (Nicholl, "The First Fictional Cowboy Hero

It is likewise probable that Nasho is the first fictional Mexican American hero in American literature--certainly he is among the earliest. Pilgrim thus used Nasho to help break a nineteenth-century American literary tradition of portraying Mexicans and Mexican Americans as cowardly (Robinson 42-49). Although even Nasho is sometimes portrayed stereotypically (mainly via his broken English), he is almost always shown quite sympathetically by Pilgrim, who is clearly aware of and often openly or implicitly critical of the various racial stereotypes, prejudices, and slurs prevalent in Texas and elsewhere in the United States in the 1870's--and that still linger over a century later.

For instance, while the boys are visiting San Antonio to sell wild animal hides, wild turkeys, and pecans to help finance their trip to Philadelphia, a breezy Anglo newspaper seller in casual conversation with Charley, and with Nasho standing by, refers to Nasho as a "little greaser" (LBT 111). Nasho and

Charley do not react to this man's epithet or to his stereotypical remark about the natural baking skills of Mexicans. However, when they later join the trail drive crew (itself of mixed composition--African American and Mexican American as well as Anglo-American) and one of the Anglo cowboys uses the same phrase in asking a question of Charley, the Anglo youth is quick to explain Nasho's background and to ask the crew members not to call his friend a "greaser" (163). The trailboss, Captain Dick, backs up Charley, warning the cowhands that "these boys ain't fair game" and ordering them to come to him if they have anything against either boy (164). With that support and the boys' own demonstrations of riding and herding ability, both are soon accepted as full members of the crew. In fact, it is late in the second novel before another man shows prejudice toward Nasho by saying, "I sorter hate to trust much to the little Mexican that's out after the horses." This time, a couple of explanatory sentences from Captain Dick are enough to quell Nasho's Dakota Territory critic (LBBH 207).

Of course the novels' readers had learned about Nasho's ability long before. If prowess and courage are two important attributes of a hero, especially a Western one (Steckmesser 255), than Nasho had already shown those traits several years earlier, while still a Kickapoo captive. Having become proficient with bow and arrow, Nasho was out hunting, apparently at age eleven or twelve, when he spotted an Indian from another tribe riding alone. Nasho promptly slipped off his pony and crawled to an ambush site. There he killed the Indian stranger with an arrow,

scalped him, caught up both ponies, and rode back home to a celebration and acceptance as a warrior (LBT 14).

Nasho shows similar fighting ability when he and two adult warriors are surprised by Adolphus Zanco and another white Texan while on a horsestealing trip. The Texans shoot and kill the two Indians, but merely capture the boy, despite the fact that he had stabbed one of their hunting dogs. However, when left tied to a tree while the Texans go to search the dead Indians, Nasho quickly works loose and begins riding away. However, a Texan's rifle shot "creases" his pony's neck, and Nasho is pinned beneath his injured mount's fallen body with a broken leg (14-18). During his recuperation Mr. Zanco converses with him in Spanish, finds out Nasho's story, and takes the boy into his household, later giving him the responsibility of helping herd livestock (21). Charley and Nasho soon become friends, and the adventures of the "Live Boys" begin.

Nasho immediately demonstrates his tracking or pathfinding ability, leading Charley over thirty miles away, to the spot where the would-be Indian horsethieves had cached weapons several months earlier (23-25). Soon after, he goes hunting with a newly-recovered bow and arrows, and returns carrying fresh venison (28-31). Nasho also surpasses Charley at tree climbing, using a rawhide strap that Charley cannot learn to use (36). Then the feats become more impressive.

First Nasho leads a successful panther hunt, with Mr. Zanco doing the shooting (37-42). In this incident, Nasho's calmness contrasts sharply with Charley's admitted fear (37), again highlighting the Chicano boy's heroism. In a later incident, Nasho's

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

quick but calm thinking saves a valuable horse from a neighbor's burning barn, after the rescue attempt of two men had failed (66-67). Soon afterward he demonstrates still more hunting prowess, shooting two deer almost simultaneously (76) and joining Charley in killing four wolves threatening their camp that night (77).

But their major feat in this section of the first novel is catching Wild Bill, a blue roan stallion who for several years had thwarted all attempts at capture. Using Nasho's plan, Charley drops a loop over the horse's head from an overhanging tree, and then Nasho ropes the stallion's front legs and pulls them out from under him, thereby dropping him to the ground where the boys subdue him (79-87). Later, Charley halters, saddles, and mounts the stallion, then takes off on a wild ride across the countryside and over a bluff into a river, thus leaving Nasho far behind and separated even further by nightfall (88-98). The next morning Nasho shows up, having followed Charley's trail to the river and then spotted his campfire. Nasho's loyal pursuit seals their friendship, for Charley thinks, "There ain't many [Anglo-] American boys that would have followed me up as he did. Nasho'll do to trust every time if he likes anybody" (99).

Later adventures where Nasho shows his heroic abilities include the capture of a big black bear that had consistently escaped men hunting it with dogs. From horseback, the boys lasso the bear and pull him up tight against a tree, where Nasho daringly cuts its throat and then joins Charley in carefully skinning the trophy-sized animal (133-137). Soon after, Nasho and Charley take on their first human opponent, this time

recovering two valuable strayed horses from an African American man who insists the horses are his and tries to shoot the boys. Nasho's roping ability saves them here, but we also see another side of Nasho's character, as he is all for killing the outlaw, as he says Indians would have done, rather than letting him go, as Charley insists (140-143). Nasho's vindictive streak remains repressed until late in this first novel, when he does kill an assailant, this time a Comanche brave. However, in this case Charley does not protest, since not only are the boys alone in the Indian Territory but they have also just survived a confrontation with renegade Indians through the intervention of a young Indian chief Nasho had known among the Kickapoo (288-307).

Nasho's desire for vengeance--or perhaps his pragmatism--surfaces two other times, both in the second novel. First, he wants to hang another horse thief but is outvoted by Charley and Captain Dick, with the latter serving as a mouthpiece for Pilgrim's high-minded moral code (LBBH 209-212). Later, when Charley finds a wounded Blackfoot warrior while hunting, Nasho advises killing him. However, Charley insists on nursing the Indian until he's well enough to travel, a plan that almost backfires when five Pawnee scouts show up, saying that the Blackfoot has killed one of their men. The boys manage to face down the Pawnees and later send the recovered Blackfoot on his way, possibly to provide a miraculous rescue of Charley in a third Live Boys novel that Pilgrim did not live to write (LBBH 241-245).

A more important example of Nasho's ability to hold his own against men appears in the first novel, when he and Charley

thwart some of their fellow cowboys who are trying to steal the trailherd as it nears the Kansas border. The 1876 crew included five Mexican Americans (including Nasho and the cook), two African Americans, and six Anglos (including Charley and Captain Dick). One night, led by a disgruntled white cowboy named Highover, two other white cowboys and the three adult Chicano cowboys grab Captain Dick and his best cowboy, Whistling Bill, and tie them up. Ignoring Nasho and the cook, whom they assume are on their side, and unaware of the whereabouts of Charley (he had awakened to restake his grazing nighthorse and then had hidden when he saw what was going on), all of the thieves but one go off to persuade the two African American cowboys, guarding the herd, to join them. Nasho slips off to join Charley, and the Mexican American youth suggests stampeding the herd as a means of diverting the thieves long enough to free Captain Dick and Whistling Bill, who are being watched by a lone armed guard. Nasho's plan works and the good men are freed, although before the action is over Nasho again shows his prowess by roping Highover to keep him from shooting Captain Dick (LBT 233-253). Remarkable in this whole key episode is Nasho's role, first as the mind behind the rescue plan, and then as Captain Dick's savior, when Pilgrim could just as easily have written the scene to let Charley take the hero's part.

Nasho's only remaining heroic action in the first novel comes when Charley and Nasho go to capture a buffalo bull, on a bet between Captain Dick and an English sportsman touring the American West. Nasho ends up "tailing" the massive animal,

already roped by Charley, to throw him down (by grabbing the beast's tail and wrapping it around his saddle's horn while riding rapidly). Nasho then uses another rope to tie the stunned bull securely, thus winning the bet (264-266).

The second novel has more heroic activity by Nasho, some already described, but in it he tends to be overshadowed by Charley, in part because the Anglo boy seems to have learned much from his Chicano companion. While on the cattle trail, though, Nasho does help recover the horse herd after a nighttime buffalo stampede leaves most of the cowboys afoot and their cattle badly scattered (LBBH 88-94). Then he and Charley trail the buffalo and successfully recover over three hundred cattle that had gotten mixed up with the wild animals (97-110). Much later, in the gold mining area, Charley and Nasho run off some claim jumpers, with Nasho putting an arrow through one of them (338-341).

At different points in this second book, Pilgrim also has Charley comment favorably on special traits of Nasho: his even temperament, compared favorably with that of the book's adult hero, Captain Dick (78); his exceptional knowledge of Indians (86); his ability to read Indian signs and notice natural activity (105-6); his dislike of hunting for its own sake (152); the way he wakes up quietly, unlike most other boys (239). Nasho is by no means perfect, of course, as indicated earlier in the discussion of his desire for vengeance on horse thieves, claim jumpers, and Indians. And like Huck Finn, he's already taken up smoking, although instead of a pipe he rolls his own cigarettes in the best cowboy tradition (290).

Our last view of Nasho comes from a letter that closes the second novel. Written by Captain Dick, it describes how Nasho and Charley joined the legendary frontier hero Yellowstone Kelly in a four-day Indian battle on the "North Fork of the Belle Fourche" (really the Belle Fourche or North Fork of the Cheyenne River--Morgan 33), near the Wyoming-Dakota Territory border, and fought admirably. However, the night after that fight ended, Charley disappeared in a snowstorm. Nasho tried to track him the next morning, but after nearly freezing to death while searching for his friend, the Mexican American youth returned alone (358-363). The rest is silence, although Pilgrim had made it clear in this second work's preface that a third Live Boys novel, with Charley among the Indians, was planned. Presumably Nasho was to figure prominently in his friend's eventual rescue.

Thus the Live Boys saga ends, not with a period, but with a question mark. Foreshadowing the similar open-ended conclusion Mark Twain would use for Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, readers are left to surmise about the rest of the "life" of Ygnacio de Garapitas, the orphaned teenager who very likely was the first Mexican American fictional hero.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Bibliography

Bentley, H. L., and Thomas Pilgrim. The Texas Legal Directory for 1876-77. Austin: Democratic Statesman Office, 1877.

Dobie, J. Frank. Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest. Rev. ed. Dallas: Southern Methodist U P, 1952.

Kirk, John Foster. A Supplement to Allibone's Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1899.

Nicholl, James R. "The First Fictional Cowboy Hero: Captain Dick of Pilgrim's Live Boys Novels." (Unpublished paper, presented at Western Literature Association Annual Meeting, Albuquerque, NM, October 5, 1979.)

Pilgrim, Thomas (pseudonym Arthur Morecamp). Live Boys; or, Charley and Nasho in Texas. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1878.

-----. Live Boys in the Black Hills or The Young Texan Gold Hunters. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1880.

Morgan, Dale L., ed. Rand McNally's Pioneer Atlas of the American West. [Facsimile reproductions of maps and indexes from the 1876 first edition of Rand, McNally & Co.'s Business Atlas of the Great Mississippi Valley and Pacific Slope.] 1969 Edition. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1956.

Robinson, Cecil. With the Ears of Strangers: The Mexican in American Literature. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1963.

Steckmesser, Kent L. The Western Hero in History and Legend. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1965.

Tatum, Charles M. Chicano Literature. Boston: Twayne, 1982.

Wallace, W. Stewart. A Dictionary of North American Authors Deceased Before 1950. Toronto: Ryerson, 1951.